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ISSUE 5 November/December 2007

FROM THE PUBLISHERS OF *Pilot*

HOT FAST & CLOSE

Challenge and excitement
in the Aero GP shows

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Old aeroplane
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 **Feature** Aero GP



Pretty girls, fast aeroplanes and blue skies - could life get any better?



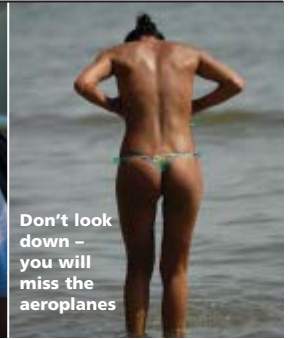
Roaring past the beaches in mirror formation - what a crowd-pleaser!



Aero GP boss Jeff Zaltman briefs the crews at Tuzla



Britain's Andy Bickmore is overtaken (again)!



Don't look down – you will miss the aeroplanes



&Guts &Glory

Four of the world's best pilots race wingtip to wingtip just feet above the waves... welcome to the world of Aero GP

Photographs by Branko Ceak & Philip Baker

Reno air race guru and 243 mission Vietnam veteran CJ Stephens lifts the handheld radio to his mouth and speaks clearly and purposefully. "Wind check – northerly less than five knots. Keep it steady guys... OK looking good... racing in 3... 2... 1... Gentlemen, you have a race!"

In the cockpit of his Yak-52TW taildragger local pilot Ioan Postolache pushes his throttle to the firewall unleashing every one of the 360hp his radial engine can produce... The inaugural Aero GP Constanta Challenge is under way.

Diving down to a few metres above the waves the sensation of speed increases tenfold and he's soon hauling the big Yak onto its wingtip as he enters the first turn.

Just a few tenths of a second behind him Britain's Andy Bickmore has the Yak in his sights. He's flying a Sukhoi Su-29, another draggy aeroplane of Russian descent but powered by a massive 400hp engine. It's nip and tuck as they round the corner and that extra 40hp makes a big difference on the straight and Andy eases into the lead.

As the pair jostle for position the others bide their time. Flying slightly higher to avoid the turbulent air are

Slovenia's Peter Podlunsek and Hungary's Zoltan Veres – both flying versions of the Extra 300.

Peter is first to make his move, easing the throttle open a smidge on lap three and posting a fastest lap of 49.7 seconds. As the airspeed rises he's soon closing on the Yak and Sukhoi and some deft overtaking puts him into the lead as he rounds the final turn of the lap.

It's getting hot now, the goldfish bowl canopies on these aeroplanes act like huge greenhouses, and the intense racing has left Andy and Ioan dripping wet. The sudden surprise of seeing Peter whiz past at high speed puts them both off their stride and Zoltan seizes the chance to sneak through to second. He's soon snapping at Peter's heels too and the pair of Extras descend even lower over the water to try to avoid the turbulence.

The hot conditions and almost nil wind mean the pilots have to contend with not only thermic turbulence but also their own wake vortices. With lap times well under a minute there isn't enough time for the wind to blow the turbulent air away before the next circuit.

In the clearer air at the front of the pack Peter extends his lead and on

lap 4 posts a race best of 48.2 seconds and easily takes the win from Zoltan, with Andy following in third and Ioan bringing up the rear.

DOG FIGHT

These days the historic and beautiful Black Sea coastal resort of Constanta in Romania usually resembles a cross between Blackpool and Ibiza. But today the 100,000 people enjoying the 40-degree temperatures on Mamaia Beach are revelling in this very different type of entertainment – Aero GP is much more than just racing and prizes are also awarded for freestyle performances and the coveted Deadliest Dogfighter trophy.

The first of the day's dogfight sessions follows next. Round one is between Ioan and Andy and in the cockpit the competition is fierce. Yet again the heat and turbulence play a part and Ioan is working hard to stay on Andy's tail. He might be in a faster and more manoeuvrable aeroplane but Andy just can't shake off the Yak and by the end of the round it is local "dark horse" Ioan who claims the victory. The crowd goes wild!

Round two sees the two Extras going head-to-head... it's going to be a very close battle. Peter makes the first move and tries to get Zoltan

RACERS



NAME: Zoltan Veres
NATIONALITY: Hungarian
AIRCRAFT: Extra EA-300S
POSITION: Gold



NAME: Peter Podlunsek
NATIONALITY: Slovenian
AIRCRAFT: Extra EA-300L
POSITION: Silver



NAME: Ioan Postolache
NATIONALITY: Romanian
AIRCRAFT: IAR Yak-52TW
POSITION: Bronze



NAME: Andy Bickmore
NATIONALITY: British
AIRCRAFT: Sukhoi Su-29
POSITION: Wooden Spoon

GoFlying! Thoughts... "Flying is not Nintendo. You don't push a button and start over"

into his sights. Initially Zoltan climbs vertically before rolling quickly, a look over his shoulder reveals Peter is still in close pursuit. He rolls 90 left in an attempt to confuse Peter, then switches the roll direction and pulls out in a 45 degree dive. His dummy hasn't worked though and Peter gets the 'kill'. It's a close call but by the end of the session the judges narrowly award Peter the win.

After each combat round the pilots demonstrate their awesome aerobatic flying capabilities to the amazement of the crowd. All along the beach and in the water people are spellbound by the gravity-defying displays of skill by some of the best pilots in the world. Little do they know how exhausted and dehydrated the pilots actually are.

LOCAL TALENT

Local pilots also get a chance to showcase their talents during the Aero GP weekend. First off this weekend is the world's first ever race between Antonov AN-2 Colt biplanes. The giant workhorses of the skies are an amazing sight as they lumber around the skies.

Next up is a display by skilled Romanian parachutists from nearby Tuzla airfield who deftly land on the beach just metres from the VIP area.

A solo AN-2 also takes to the sky accompanied by two Yak-52 chase planes and they perform an aerial ballet that impresses both the locals and the expert judges from Aero GP alike.

The second race of the day is in the evening sunshine and cooler temperatures enable the pilots to increase their speed by quite a margin. Again an early lead by Ioan is taken by first one pilot and then another – and six changes of the lead in a five-lap race keep the crowd on their feet. The fastest lap goes to Zoltan with 42 seconds but with Peter just 2/10ths of a second slower. Both are some 6 seconds faster than in Race 1. In the end it is Zoltan who narrowly claims victory from previous winner Peter, with Andy again in 3rd.

DAY TWO

The pilots return to the air with added determination to fly faster, better and lower than ever before. An impending Black Sea storm is inflicting cloudy skies and gusting winds on the racers, however the

pilots press on regardless and the spectators on the beach are in for another day of extraordinary flying.

The first race kicks off at 2pm and is an absolute cracker. Once again local pilot Ioan takes an early lead in his Yak, followed closely by Peter and Zoltan in the Extras with Andy bringing up the rear in the big Sukhoi. However, by lap three Peter and Zoltan in the extremely aerodynamic Extras are jostling for the lead.

On lap 4 Zoltan posts the fastest lap of the race with an amazing 44.21 seconds but not even this is enough to catch Peter. By the time they cross the line at the end of lap 6 Peter has stretched his lead to two seconds and flies back to race HQ (at nearby Tuzla airfield) victorious. Zoltan chases him home in second 44 seconds ahead of Andy, who in turn is 22 seconds ahead of Ioan.

Peter's win was down to a combination of smooth flying, excellent engine management and clever tactics. He remained level in the turns, pulling a steady amount of 'G' force, to retain his speed.

ONE-ON-ONE

Today's one-on-one combat sessions prove even more difficult to judge. This time Zoltan and Ioan go head to

/// The world's first ever race between Antonov AN-2 Colt biplane workhorses ///

head in the first dogfight and it quickly turns into a classic tailchase. However, by the end of the session Zoltan has the edge and returns to base victorious.

Next up are Andy and Peter and it's interesting to compare the high speed Extra and the extremely manoeuvrable Sukhoi in close combat. The Su-29 will outturn the EA-300, but the Extra can pull away and out of range in the straight and level. In the end the victory comes down to tactics and Peter pulls up into a victory roll to the delight of the crowds.



"And the winner is..." Constanta's mayor enjoys his moment of glory



THE WINNER IS...

In an indication of the status in which the Aero GP series is now held the Constanta mayor held a special reception in the town square at 8pm to announce the winner of the 2007

Constanta Challenge.

Aero GP is made up of three distinct competition areas – Air Combat, Barnstorming and the actual Race itself. This weekend the Champion Air Combat pilot was judged as Peter Podlunsek while Zoltan Veres took home the award for the Best Air Race Pilot. However, as far as the locals were concerned, it was the Barnstorming victory by local boy Ioan Postolache that really stole the show!

Points gained throughout the weekend in the various disciplines are gathered together at the end of the challenge to decide who has won the prestigious title of Constanta Challenge Flying Ace.

"And the winner is..." announced the mayor, milking the tension and obviously relishing the experience... "Zoltan Veres!"

An excellent all-round performance meant Zoltan flew back to Hungary with the title he

really wanted. He gained 29 points throughout the weekend, boosted by several fastest laps in the racing, and was the happiest man in Constanta that evening. However just two points separated him from his good friend Peter Podlunsek at the end of the weekend and this will doubtless fuel the competition between them. Local pilot Ioan Postolache gained a very creditable third place in his very first Aero GP outing and Andy Bickmore flew home with 16 points, no doubt vowing to review his tactics before the next race weekend.

EXHILARATING

Aero GP is one of the most exhilarating sports you can find. Nowhere else in the world can you see high-performance aerobatic aeroplanes racing just feet above the waves in close formation and at such high speed. With all aircraft battling for the best line around the turn points this is where a race is won or lost... a pilot can drop from first to last in the blink of an eye just by using the wrong tactics.

It's not an understatement to say that these pilots are among the best in the world and to see them competing in such close proximity is truly awe-inspiring. Roll on the next round of Aero GP... **GF!**

FINAL CHANCE

The racers return to crowd centre shortly after 4pm for the final, and as it happens the most exciting, race of the weekend.

Zoltan leads from the start, posts the fastest lap (41.28 seconds) and crosses the line in first place (after 4mins 06.43 seconds) but behind him the racing is intense.

Positions swap several times and poor Ioan finds himself being lapped (a first for Aero GP) as he heads towards the finish line at the end of lap 4.



If only all aviation enthusiasts looked like this!



You need every one of those 360 horses to win



Watch the birdie! Zoltan enjoys some hot-dogging